

A Reflection
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Name Says It All

Matthew 1:18-25

Each Sunday this month, as the offering plates are brought forward, we've been singing, "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, His name is called Emmanuel; / God with us, revealed in us; / His name is called Emmanuel." Think back across all that we've done in the life of our congregation thus far during December. All the singing, praying, and preaching. All the practicing, rehearsing, and presenting. All the decorating, eating, and giving. It all comes down to a name, and what that name means in the life of God's people, and to the life of the world. Emmanuel.

You may see the name spelled in slightly different ways. The spelling Immanuel is the customary way to transliterate the Hebrew word in the Old Testament. The spelling Emmanuel is the customary way to transliterate the Greek word in the New Testament. In some cases, it's spelled with just one "m," Emanuel. The bottom line is that whether you use "E" or "I," or seven letters or eight, this is how followers of Jesus spell Christmas: Emmanuel.

Granted, it's not unusual for us to attempt to condense the significance of the season into a memorable, repeatable nugget of truth and wisdom. Some slogans are more religiously focused. Jesus is the reason for the season. Keep Christ in Christmas. Other slogans are designed to be more broadly appealing. If you don't believe, you won't receive. Christmas in the heart puts Christmas in the air. And other slogans just aim to spread some humor. Dear Santa, Define Good. Don't get your tinsel in a tangle.

Part of our purpose today is to take the deep and enduring things we believe about Christ's birth and disentangle them from the cultural tinsel that provides a lot of holiday shine but not necessarily a lot of staying power. Seasonal slogans come and go. But the name of the one who has come, and has promised to come again, abides. Remember that we're people who also sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, / And ransom captive Israel, / That mourns in lonely exile here, / Until the Son of God appear." As we remember his first appearing, and wait actively and expectantly for his final appearing, we have another opportunity here today to unpack some of what's contained in the name that means "God with us."

In our text, Matthew draws upon a promise that the prophet Isaiah made centuries earlier. Isaiah issued this declaration of hope in the midst of conflict. Syria and Israel had attacked Judah. Jerusalem and the royal family were under siege. But Isaiah foresaw a new era to come. And Matthew sees that new era as a present reality through the arrival of Jesus. His birth is the sign of God's presence, "God with us."

In a Jewish context, naming was no light or casual matter. A name was more than just a way of labeling someone, so as to be able to distinguish that person from others. A name was intended to convey something about who that person is. You didn't just use a name to identify someone. You used a name to define someone, to capture the essence of their being.

So to speak of Jesus as Emmanuel is to say that God is with us, and that Jesus is God's way of being with us, which means that God's way of being with us is very personal and deeply relational. God is not with us primarily through a body of knowledge, or a set of data, that we can download into our lives. God is not with us primarily through a written text or a body of tradition, though our Scriptures and the beliefs to which we hold are critical to our faith. God is not with us primarily through an inner experience that gives us special insight into complex divine mysteries. Rather, God is with us in and through the person of Jesus. So if we want to know who God is, and what God is doing in the world and in our lives, we have to know Jesus. That's one of the reasons why Matthew tells us about the birth of the person named Jesus, whose name itself means "the Lord saves."

Several years ago, a Christian magazine asked pastors, theologians, and others to answer the question, What's the gospel in seven words? One person wrote, "God refuses to be God without us." Since he and other respondents were invited to expand on their answer in a few sentences, he went on to say, "We asked God to say something definite and God, getting personal, sent Jesus Christ."¹ As he went on to emphasize, God isn't a collection of high-sounding theological abstractions, but rather a God whose will and purpose are embodied in the suffering, self-emptying love of Jesus Christ, the love of God for us.

Remember that God, out of his love for us, comes to us in our estrangement and hostility toward him, and reconciles us to himself. In Christ, most of all his death on the cross, God forgives us and makes us new. As Matthew stresses, Jesus is God's way of saving us from our sins. If there's going to be God with us and us with God, then this is what it takes.

And when you become reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, you become part of a community that Jesus has gathered, a community called the church. One of this community's assignments is be an embodiment of the name Emmanuel. In other words, to be an unambiguous sign to the world that God is with us, a living display of reconciliation at work. That's why we keep singing: "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, His name is called Emmanuel; / God with us, revealed in us; / His name is called Emmanuel." May each of us, and our congregation as a whole, live up to that name, so the world may know that God is with us.

¹ William H. Willimon, "God Refuses to Be God Without Us." The Christian Century website. November 4, 2011. Accessed December 22, 2019 <<https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2011-11/god-refuses-be-god-without-us>>.